

## The Personal and Public Spheres in *Habemus Papam* (2011):

### A Cinematic “Prophecy” on the Future of the Church

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**Abstract:** This piece offers a critical study of *Habemus Papam* (Nanni Moretti, 2011) at the heel of the unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict XVI. The film scored international success and won several prizes and a nomination to the *Palme d’or* at the Cannes Film Festival. It is an unusually successful film on religion which stands out for directly dealing with the divine nature and future of the Catholic Church. The study is conducted by placing the film into a historical perspective and by underscoring its unprecedented political position on the topic of religion and film. It examines the alleged “prophetic” ability the film had in predicting the resignation of the Pope, and the implied critical discourse on the future of the Church. The argument is that the principal theme and forms of *Habemus Papam* propose a trope of modernism. The demise of religious narratives is predicated on the quality of the *mise-en-scène* and trajectory of the narrative. The iconography of the cinema replaces that of the sacred, and the turmoil of historical and scandalous events are weathered through forms of individualism and eccentricism afforded by the technical innovations and tools brought about by the modern era.

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**Key words:** Film History. Film Ethics. Film Aesthetics. Modernism. Religion. Sacred. Iconography. Catholic Church. Cinema. Nanni Moretti. Cannes. Carol Wojtyła. Benedict XVI.

**Abstract:** Questo saggio offre uno studio critico di *Habemus Papam* (Nanni Moretti, 2011) in relazione alle dimissioni inaspettate di Papa Benedetto XVI. Il film ha ottenuto un successo internazionale, vincendo numerosi premi e una nomination alla *Palme d'or* al Festival di Cannes. Si tratta di un successo insolito per un film sulla religione; un film che si occupa direttamente della natura divina e del futuro della Chiesa Cattolica. Lo studio è condotto ponendo innanzitutto il film in una prospettiva storica, e sottolineandone la posizione politica senza precedenti sul tema della religione e del cinema. Si esamina la presunta capacità “profetica” mostrata nel film nel predire le dimissioni del Papa, e il discorso implicitamente critico sul futuro della Chiesa. La tesi che domina questo studio è che il tema principale e le forme di *Habemus Papam* propongono una metafora del modernismo. La scomparsa o l'indebolimento, delle grandi tematiche religiose sono evinti dalla qualità della *mise-en-scène* del film e dalla traiettoria della storia in esso raccontata. L'iconografia del cinema sostituisce quella del sacro, e al tumulto derivato da eventi storici e scandalosi si fa fronte attraverso forme di individualismo ed eccentricità, coadiuvati a loro volta dalle innovazioni in materia di tecniche e strumenti presentati dall'era moderna.

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**Parole chiave:** Storia del cinema. Cinema e etica. Estetica del cinema. Modernismo. Religione. Sacro. Iconografia. Chiesa Cattolica. Cinema. Nanni Moretti. Cannes. Carol Wojtyla. Benedetto XVI.

*Habemus Papam* by Nanni Moretti offers a cinematic tale on the long-standing institution of the Church by stepping into the private sphere of monastic religious territory. It is an unusually successful and rare Italian and European film, on religion, which projects disconcerting questions on the role and future of the institution of the Catholic Church. Most of the critical writings — which are very short and appear to be carried out for other than rigorously scholarly purposes — have missed the chief point delivered by *Habemus Papam*. Released in the spring of 2011, almost two years before the unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, Moretti’s film made some commentators refer to it as a “prophetic” work: “Papa dimissionario, la “profezia” di Nanni Moretti. [...] Storia di assoluta fantasia scritta e girata dal regista romano: ma che adesso, alla luce della inaspettata decisione di Benedetto XVI, acquista una straordinaria attualità.”<sup>1</sup> As a major example of Italy’s contemporary national cinema’s output it takes a sharp turn on the specific issues tackled by its cinema by veering into the religious-political arena: the identity and, most troubling, the legitimacy of one

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A quitting Pope, Nanni Moretti’s “prophesy.” A story of total fantasy, written and filmed by the Roman director: but which now, at the light of the unexpected decision of Benedict XVI, becomes an extraordinarily current tale.’ *La Repubblica* February 11, 2013 [www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it)

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prominent cultural and socio-political force in a leading western country. It is the very first film, globally, where the *metteur on scène* questions the secretive praxis of the Conclave, its election impasse, and the unexpected abdication of its appointed Pontiff — which historically occurs after 700 years since the abdication of Celestine V. The film marks the date when the divine nature of the Catholic Church becomes the artistic and political concern of a filmmaker — a Roman cineaste, in this case. It is the very relation between moving-images and the socio-cultural traditions of the sacred that draws a critic and historian’s attention.

With the emergence of cinema, the century-old clash between Church and State spills onto the screen: the prerogatives of the new medium turned into an ideological and aesthetic supremacy battle.<sup>2</sup> It often took the form of a moral duel between religious and political-economic interests, the battleground to assert one’s authority and dominance over the culture industry and its persuasive strategies within a modern society and world. The daring novelty of Moretti’s film is that for the first time a commercial film questions, in a rather political tone via the artistic means proper to

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<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church began to issue exhortations, directives, and letters from the Vatican Secretary of State on the subject of cinema, beginning with the end of the 1920s and into the 1970s. “[...] già nella nostra enciclica sulla educazione della giovenù, del 21 dicembre 1929, abbiamo vivamente esortato [...] «a diffondere le buone letture e a promuovere spettacoli davvero educativi [...] creando dei teatri e cinematografi, nei quali la virtù non solo abbia nulla da perdere, bensì molto da guadagnare».” English translation: “[...] already in our December 21<sup>st</sup> 1929 encyclical letter on the education of youth, we strongly urged [...] «to disseminate good readings and to promote truly educational shows [...] creating theaters and cinemas, in which virtue not only has nothing to lose, but much to gain rather».” The same document elaborates on what constitute an ideal film in matter of educational value and narrative subjects, including the representation of evil in film. Dario Viganò, Enrico Baragli, Chiesa Cattolica, Papa. *Cinema e Chiesa: i documenti del magistero*, Cantalupa, Torino: Effatà, 2002, 63-64, 89-104.

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the medium of film, the legitimacy and usefulness of the Christian Catholic Church’s claims. Film historians will agree that this is the first and prime example of a film dealing directly and openly, in a meticulously realistic style,<sup>3</sup> with the alleged divine nature of a preeminent institution claiming to have a spiritual mandate from above. Its attack on the chief figure of the Catholic faith is both narratively blunt and pictorially subtle. The symbolic charge of the film’s aesthetic value is assured. It has been pointed out, that the realism of the drama is supported by the film’s technical code. Elements like the make-up, the colors, the setting of Palazzo Farnese, the sound, contribute to its *verisimilitudine*: “[...] il film, per gli aspetti politico-religiosi, è credibile in molti sensi,”<sup>4</sup> (Studer 1). The release of the film shocks most Catholic minds and forcefully becomes the new (and unexpected) trope of an ongoing process of modernism. Are the times ripe for a total replacement of the symbolic value of cultural traditions and its moral signposts? If the production of moving-images succeeds in breaching life into man-made simulacra, the process initiated with the invention and subsequent exploitation of the apparatus of movie-making: the movie theatres’ halls gradually replace the Churches’ pews and the star-like characters on the screen replace the Lord’s crucifixes on the altars. It may be thought that in so doing a commercial cinema, by its very definition, is outspokenly on the side of the state’s sanctioned political arts. While the issue of the ‘moral allegiances’ of the arts may be a

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<sup>3</sup> In sharp contrast to thriller genre products from authors like Dan Brown.

<sup>4</sup> “[...] with regards to the political-religious elements, the film is credible in different ways.’

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controversial one, a brief excursus into the history of religion and film will help put into perspective the singularity of *Habemus Papam* polemical but brave take. National cinemas, including their independent and nonconforming manifestations, have enjoyed institutional legitimization via the economic system and cultural policies contemplated by the state, and to this they have ultimately paid tribute to. On alternative platforms, religious institutions, and themes, have been likewise ‘served’ in different ways by the cinema, its generic canons and strands. Due to its aesthetic appeal and emotional glueyness, it has been recognized as a powerful catalyst, another arrow in their sheath of tools, which could be discharged to further propagandize the Catholic faith. At the height of Italy’s cinematic boom, its 1960s golden period, the Catholic Church weighed in to define and promote what it perceived as “cinema buono,” that is, films that constituted “un cinema per l’uomo.”<sup>5</sup> Among the list of films programmed at Church’s screening venues Catholic pamphlets mention Robert Bresson’s *Au hasard, Balthazar!* (1966), Akira Kurosawa’s *Akaige* (1965), and Sidney Pollack’s *The Slender Thread* (1966), but they seldom refer to any Italian film.<sup>6</sup> The film

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Good cinema.’ ‘A cinema at the service of man.’

<sup>6</sup> At the time the Office of the Secretary of State of the Vatican sent a letter to the “II Settimana cinematografica dei cattolici” conference, held in Assisi in the fall of 1966. In part it read (the English translation follows): “Il rispetto per l’uomo esclude lo sfruttamento del cinema a scopi meno nobili, ai quali lo sfruttamento, se non sia controllato dalla coscienza di chi ne faccia uso, si presta facilmente. Settant’anni di storia del cinema stanno purtroppo a confermare che sovente sono stati i soli interessi economici a determinare, non soltanto le innovazioni tecniche, bensì anche contenuti e forme espressive, metodi di lancio di un film e attori, a scapito, non solo dei valori religioso-morali, ma anche di quelli di una cultura e di una civiltà degne dell’uomo. Né mancano, oggi, casi di abuso dello strumento in funzione di pressione ideologico-politica; oppure, anche di mezzo di espressione, di cui, singoli e gruppi, possano disporre nella più assoluta

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industry reacted in its usual way, by outputting devotional, anti-clerical, or films altogether indifferent to religious concerns. The history of western cinemas shows a constant bid of productions, which have either endorsed and promoted, or questioned and disparaged, the religious creeds of the major denominations. Among these one finds films dealing with Catholicism and Catholic related controversial issues, with the Protestant denomination and its clashes with Catholicism, and the Evangelical wave.<sup>7</sup>

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libertà, senza cioè tener conto alcuno delle ripercussioni, anche dannose, connesse alle caratteristiche comunicative dello strumento ed alle condizioni concrete di preparazione culturale e morale, nelle quali il pubblico vi accede. [...] Perciò il Santo Padre si augura che quanti, o per vigoria d'ingegno, o per mezzi economici, o per apporto organizzativo, siano in grado di determinare la qualità di questo servizio all'uomo, maturino sempre più nella coscienza delle proprie responsabilità societarie, e si rendano sempre più consapevoli della potenza comunicativa dello strumento [...]” Enrico Baragli, “ ‘Un cinema per l'uomo’ nella ‘Cittadella’ di Assisi,” *Civiltà Cattolica*, 117.4 (1966): 267. English translation: “The respect for man excludes exploiting the cinema for less noble purposes, to which the exploitation — when it is not controlled by the conscience of those who make use of the cinema — lends itself. Unfortunately, seventy years of film history confirm that economic interests alone have often not only determined technical innovations but rather also content and forms of expression, methods for launching a film and its actors, all to the detriment of not only religious and moral values but also those of a culture and of a civilization worthy of man. Today there is no scarcity of abuse cases of the instrument of cinema, subject as it is to ideological and political pressure; or even solely as a medium of expression in the hands of individuals and groups who enjoy absolute freedom, that is, who make use of it without taking into account its effects, including the harmful ones, associated with the communicative characteristics of the instrument of cinema and with the concrete conditions of cultural and moral preparation of moviegoers. [...] Therefore, the Holy Father hopes that those who, due to extraordinary talent, or to economic means, or through organizational resources, are able to determine the quality of this service to man, may mature, conscious of their societal responsibilities, and become more and more aware of the communicative power of the instrument [...].”

<sup>7</sup> The titles include: *The Keys of the Kingdom* (John M. Stahl, 1944), *Lilies of the Field* (Ralph Nelson, 1963), *A Man for All Seasons* (Fred Zinnemann, 1966), *Priest* (Antonia Bird, 1994), *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999), and *Amen* (Costa-Gavras, 2002); *The Bishop's Wife* (Henry Koster, 1947), *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Axel, 1987), *La reine Margot* (Patrice Chéreau, 1994), *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998), and *Luther* (Eric Till, 2003); *Elmer Gantry* (Richard Brooks, 1960), *Wise Blood* (John Huston, 1979), *The Apostle* (Robert Duvall, 1997), among others.

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In Italy — under the overwhelming Catholic presence — religious themes are depicted on the screen according to the predominant and traditional strains of comedy and realism. In line with other national cinemas, Italy has re-proposed multiple times the same paradigms, depicting the Church according to generic formulas, and along politicized positions: according to pro-Christian Catholic, anti-clerical, or leftist ideologies, for the major part. Catholicism is brought to the fore and depicted in pre-neorealist, neorealist, and later cinematic trends. In Roberto Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (1946), the Church and its ‘soldiers of Christ’ battle the Nazis among the Resistance fighters. In the *Commedia all’italiana* Pietro Germi satirizes the position of the Catholic Church by having the local priest characters educate their parishioners on social mores, warn them against ‘immoral’ films — *La dolce vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) — or instructing them on how to cast their vote: “Vi esorto a dare il vostro suffragio a un partito che sia democratico e cristiano”<sup>8</sup> — a clear allusion to the Christian Democrats party of long time politicians Amintore Fanfani and Giulio Andreotti (*Divorzio all’italiana – Divorce Italian Style*, Pietro Germi, 1961). In the twentieth century’s Italian national cinema one finds a number of films extolling the Catholic faith (biased towards the concept of divinity), and a number of works denigrating it (biased towards a materialist concept of the world), with several positions in between, including one of respectful distance in matters of religion and

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<sup>8</sup> ‘I urge you to give your vote to a party which is both democratic and Christian,’ (*Divorce Italian Style*, Pietro Germi, 1961).

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spirituality. Prominent examples include: *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, Vittorio De Sica, 1948), *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (*The Flowers of St. Francis*, Roberto Rossellini, 1950), *Don Camillo e l'on. Peppone* (Carmine Gallone, 1955), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964) and *Teorema* (*Theorem*, 1968) among others, *Nel nome del padre* (*In the Name of the Father*, Marco Bellocchio, 1971), *Fratello sole, sorella luna* (*Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, Franco Zeffirelli, 1972), *In nome del Papa re* (Luigi Magni, 1977) the second in a *Risorgimento* trilogy by Magni, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, Francesco Rosi, 1979), *La messa è finita* (Nanni Moretti, 1985), *Francesco* (Liliana Cavani, 1989), *Il sole anche di notte* (*Night Sun*, Paolo and Vittorio Tavani, 1990), *L'ora di religione – Il sorriso di mia madre* (*My Mother's Smile*, Marco Bellocchio, 2002), *L'uomo che verrà* (*The Man Who Will Come*, Giorgio Diritti, 2009), *Corpo Celeste* (Alice Rohrwacher, 2011), and *Reality* (Matteo Garrone, 2012). Yet, none of these films have ever imagined to stage and de-mythicize the sacredness of Roman clergy's private and symbolic *loci*, let alone on theological or doctrinal grounds.<sup>9</sup> The innovation of *Habemus Papam* is that its very existence represents an unprecedented political position on religion and film. No Italian film has ever invested the cinema with the duty to peer into and put on display the Holy See's private quarters and space, and attempt to delve into the holiest men's psyche in search of the motivations

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<sup>9</sup> A popular ‘template’ for film scenes portraying the inside of the Vatican walls may be *The Godfather Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990), which deals with criminal allegations involving the Church rather than doctrinal dogmas proper to Catholic faith.

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of their actions and choices.<sup>10</sup> Moretti tackles a thorny issue head-on and he does so with an eloquent use of cinematic metaphors. He begins by enacting a subtle rebuff of the notion that the assembly of prelates and their city stand for those of whom it is said “You are the light of the world. A city on a hilltop cannot be hidden;” (Matthew 15:4): due to an unexplained power failure the cardinals suddenly find themselves in the dark, soon one of them trips and falls face down. At the start of the papal Conclave, the College of Cardinals and presumable ‘givers of light,’ grope in a totally dark Sistine Chapel, unable to carry out their job: the symbolic code for straying from the right path and an anticipation of what is to come.

The trajectory of the narrative is contrary to the laws of nature as far as the current collective consciousness of the Italian people, and world Catholics, is concerned and in that it depicts a scandalous scenario. “Ha una potenza mitografica che apprezzeremo solo con gli anni [...] che sconvolga il nostro immaginario, più o meno cattolico”<sup>11</sup> (Tassi 16). The newly elected pope is tormented by self-doubt, feels inadequate and unfit for the job. Just before stepping onto the balcony to greet the crowds of faithful he has a nervous breakdown and runs off, into the internal and empty rooms of St. Peter’s Basilica, to be alone with his tormented self. Within the

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<sup>10</sup> There is a hermeneutic tradition rather, aimed at interpreting various narrative films according to their alleged Scriptural or theological reference or content; an exegesis of the filmic text in a Biblical key. Adele Reinhartz, *Scripture on the Silver Screen*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003; Bryan P. Stone, *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema*, St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> ‘It has a myth-o-graphic power which requires years to be appreciated [...] which shatters our more or less Catholic imaginary.’

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ascetic and aseptic emptiness of the sumptuous compound, however — unpolluted by the uncertainties of the outside world — he feels worse, and rips open the collar of his papal shirt, as if freeing himself from asphyxiation. He undergoes a medical visit which will establish that he is in good health as far as the body is concerned. In early 2011, Moretti’s fictional Pontiff, Pope Melville, feels crushed by the sudden responsibility he must shoulder. The release date of the film and its subject matter, which in a movie poster-like slogan could be rendered as ‘the-Pope-who-quit,’ have engendered the kind of prophetic-like comments similar to the one quoted at the beginning of this discussion. The action which is supposed to fulfill the prophecy, however, is chronologically, contextually, and in matter of its rationale, completely incompatible with its alleged prediction. Yet, it is by exposing the fallacy in the dogma of the Pope’s infallibility that the film’s alleged prophetic ability draws attention. This becomes the subject of the first new trope. In the modern era the figurative value of prophecy is re-set and re-cast via the material intervention afforded by the cinema onto the real and the imaginary. The nature and quality of what is traditionally considered a prophecy undergoes a transformation by and through the processes of filmmaking. The iconographic artifacts and/or rituals constituting the equipment of faith, and its signposts, are replaced by the cinema’s technical gear and by the formal strategies of cinematic representation. These have ushered the layman and secularized mind into the executive chambers via the art of film. In Moretti’s film the Pontiff’s dire refusal takes place even before crossing the threshold of St. Peter’s Basilica’s

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central balcony where he is required to greet and bless the sheepfolds of his pastoral ministry. The early conversation the newly elected Pope has with the psychoanalyst (played by Moretti himself), who has been covertly called in by the Vatican to deal with the unexpected misgivings in their leading man, reveals the main issue at the center of the filmic drama:

Pope: Dio vede in me delle qualità che io non ho.

Psychoanalyst: Lei è stato scelto, diciamo da Dio, per le sue qualità.

Pope: È stato deciso dai cardinali. (Beat) È stato deciso da Dio.<sup>12</sup>

The exchange alludes to the central questions raised by *Habemus Papam*: Who appoints the spiritual head of the Catholic Church? Is he appointed by God or democratically elected by the College of Cardinals? The question is elevated to ceremonial value by the elaborate costumes, the set design, and occurrence of credible performances, which legitimize the processes of *mimesis* and subsequent *poiesis*. It is not that the principles of the school of realism reach new levels in *Habemus Papam* but these, in conjunction with the narrative matter, depict a revolutionary moment, a moment of epiphany and creation: a moment in which the traditional nature and power of prophecy is disowned and then re-appropriated through the power of cinema. The epiphany is supported by the intended paradox, derived from the fact that the question is raised in conversation with the therapist of the Pope’s human psyche — a theologically incongruous notion within the divine and doctrinal nature of

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<sup>12</sup> Pope: God sees in me qualities which I do not have. Psychoanalyst: You have been chosen, presumably by God, for your qualities. Pope: It was decided by the cardinals. (Beat). It was decided by God.

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the ecclesiastic institution. The performative shock of the standing-by ensemble of cardinals, who learn that the number-one Roman psychoanalyst they have summoned is a “non credente” (a non-believer), lends fodder to the turning point: when saints lose their halo and are tormented by human doubt. The modern doctor’s therapeutic philosophy threatens the fundamental credo of the religious faith. The atheist psychoanalyst explains: the beauty of Darwinism resides in the very fact that life lacks a purpose, a whatsoever consolatory epilogue. The clergy nevertheless sticks to its unorthodox decision to resort to psychoanalysis (rather than to divine means) and seek a second-opinion from a female psychoanalyst, hoping to speedily cure the spiritual qualms of their most holy man. In both cases the psychoanalyst’s job is beset by an impossible task: they must help the Pope without knowing his name — for it cannot be divulged to them — nor make reference to sex, motherly love, unrealized aspirations, and dreams, the intimate and private nature of which are the very subjects of psychoanalysis. The clash of ideas parallels the clash between the spiritual realm of faith, which demands a blind belief in invisible certitudes and the visual realm of the cinema which affords an aesthetic action rewarding the subject with visible experience of *scopophilia*. Via a useful narrative expedient, and in line with Moretti’s body of films and autobiographical bent, the character of the second-best psychoanalyst in Rome is the ex-wife of the first. The autobiographism is reinforced by relating a marital squabble: she cannot get over the fact that he is a better psychoanalyst than her. She

will also offer an analytical explanation but from a motherly perspective — the

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rationale of which is quite at odds with both the Church’s Marian teachings and its doctrines on women. The Pope will meet her outside the Vatican walls in incognito and, oblivious as to his real identity, she will cure his misgivings. The process involves memory and denouement. Melville’s unresolved acting ambitions — which recall Pope Wojtyla’s biography — are brought to the surface and he re-evaluates the delicate balance between performance and essence, mask and being, ‘clothing and monk.’ Masks wear out along with the concepts they are meant to convey and man must constantly re-build his identity with new masks reflecting the change.

The dominance of the traditional cultural institutions breaks down from within. The modern revolution initiated by the technology of the cinema fosters individual participation and initiative, by which cultural production is down-scaled and re-focused on single authors and makers. As Jenkins argued in 2003, this is a process in which the transition is conspicuously played out via media technology the evolution of which, since the Industrial Revolution — the time when moving images began to emerge — have resulted in changes in matter of the concepts of participation, authorship, and ownership, of cultural production and statutes, though new structures of power tend to re-appropriate them (Jenkins 281-296). Throughout Moretti’s film the Catholic clergy, except the newly elected Pope, is bewildered and incapable of envisioning alternatives to the *status quo*. Within and outside the Vatican perimeter in *Habemus Papam* we never see the newly elected pope turn to God as per the Psalmist’s example discussed in the film — as if there is no space left for the God-figure-head.

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The *mise-en-scène* is heavily charged with symbolism: outside the Holy City, Pope Melville ends up meeting with the Vatican’s powerful spokesperson in the historical site of the Foro Romano, the remains of the pagan classical world. In the place where once stood the Roman Commons, surrounded by the sun-dried sprawling ruins of a foregone past, and under a luminous sky, Pope Melville makes an outrageous proposition to the Vatican’s spokesperson, before he is forced to face the crowds of faithful. The spokesperson pleads: “Vi supplico, fate un atto di obbedienza al Signore. Tornate con noi. Un miliardo di persone vi sta aspettando.” But Melville replies: “Ma non si può fare che io scompaio, sparisco? Nessuno mi ha mai visto, nessuno mi vedrà mai più, ve lo prometto. Lasciatemi andare via, vi prego.”<sup>13</sup> The scene stands for a trope of the cycles of history, and that is where one may adduce alleged “prophetic” strength to it. Any prophetic character in the words alone is to be parsed by excluding the physical context, changing the discussion, discarding most of the semantics, and by extrapolating within totally different circumstances the fictional Pope’s yearning for a secluded existence: “Nobody will see me again,” which somewhat echoes Pope Benedict’s recent words, “I will be hidden to the world” — which is also similar to the alleged reason behind the abdication of Celestine V in 1294, who yearned to go back to his humble existence. In Moretti’s film Pope Melville is said to be disobeying

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<sup>13</sup> Spokesperson: I beg you, an act of obedience to the Lord! Come back with us. One billion people are waiting. Melville: Can’t you have me disappear altogether? No one has seen me, no one will ever see me again, I promise. Let me go, please.

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God, while his alleged real-life referent (Pope Benedict XVI) claimed to be obeying God’s call by quitting. The discrepancy in the making of a prophecy trivializes the source of its inspiration. The praxis of Melville would indicate that the art of cinema demands higher standards for its narrative compared to those required in real life contexts. Yet, the attribution of prophetic-work disproportionately inflates the cultural purpose of the cinema by ascribing to it prophesying powers which it clearly and utterly lacks — and in most cases it does not claim to have.

The historical meaning and etymology of the word “prophecy”, in fact, lead back to the Judeo-Christian tradition: an inspired utterance, from a divine source that is, born as an infallible oracle or revelation. *Habemus Papam* does not claim to be an inspired film. It politicizes, rather, the topical question of the role of the Church in a secularized country and modern world. The critical strength of the narrative hinges on discrediting the papacy’s most cherished precept: the legitimacy of its earthly role as the infallible vicar of God, appointed by the Holy Spirit. The eventful element in Moretti’s film is the very fallibility of the Pope. “[...] un microcosm in cui il Potere è al livello massimo o non è. Lo conferma il dogma dell’infalibilità del Papa [...]”<sup>14</sup> (Cremonini 14). The absolutism of Vatican walls and doctrines meet up with the plasticity of film. The film questions the traditional meaning of prophecy by refuting its divine source and by enacting a mistake. The Conclave ends up electing the wrong

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<sup>14</sup> “[...] a microcosm in which Power is either held at the highest level or it is not. This is confirmed by the dogma of the Pope’s infallibility [...]”

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man. Who, then, is at fault for selecting such a fallible appointee to the Holy See? Is it the College of Cardinals or the Holy Spirit? The Catholic credo teaches that by definition the Holy Spirit cannot err, nor inspire to err. The film both poses a dilemma and exposes a fallacy. Read in this context the unexpected recent resignation of Benedict XVI rather than fulfilling an oracle only reinforces the secular re-definition of prophecy which Moretti’s film proposes.<sup>15</sup> Here the certainty and expectation of faith — as per its biblical Epistle-to-the-Hebrew’s definition — is made uncertain by allegorically breaking the century-old tradition it rests upon, namely the indubitable divine nature of the mandate of the Christian Catholic Church and its Pontiff. Michel Piccoli, the actor playing Pope Melville, is called to portray a vulnerable and very modern human being — as per the performances of the *porporati* (red-clad cardinals) — who cannot bear to wear the Papal paraphernalia nor execute its unerring role. His psychological vulnerability and spiritual weakness are ultimately meant to render the character endearing to its viewers.

The fate of Moretti’s film — not to mention its box-office revenues — is aided by the variety of positions critics have adopted in reviewing it: the bland assessment of some and the stern and serious judgment of others. In Italy, and other European countries, a few critics have referred to *Habemus Papam* with unflattering adjectives:

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<sup>15</sup> Following the abdication of Pope Ratzinger, a number of literary and cinematic works received special attention, and were re-thought of as carriers of a ‘prophecy.’ They include: *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (Michael Anderson, 1968); Juan M. Laboa, *Gesù a Roma: Il sogno di Benedetto XVI, una parabola*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2013; Umberto Vitello, *Il curatore segreto del Vaticano*, Lecce: Lupo Editore, 2012.

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vague, toothless, anticlerical, unfocused etc. A pro-clerical sympathy may have led some of them to oppose the film’s cultural and ethical assumptions. Secular minds, however, have expressed a different view. The following is a sample of the variety of antithetical positions adopted. The Italian paper *La Repubblica* wrote “un film di massima intelligenza e libertà,”<sup>16</sup> while *Il Corriere della Sera* criticized the film with the words “Non basta l’idea geniale.”<sup>17</sup> And *l’Avvenire* — “il giornale dei vescovi”<sup>18</sup> published an open letter by vaticanist Salvatore Izzo; in part it read:

Non è un bello spettacolo vedere scimmiettare la figura del capo della Chiesa cattolica con la farsa dell’elezione impossibile di un candidato fragile e bisognoso di aiuto [...] Il Papa non si tocca. È il Vicario di Cristo, la roccia su cui Gesù ha fondato la sua Chiesa.<sup>19</sup>

At the symbolic level of trope the political and religious issues at stake make the climatic action at the center of Moretti’s narrative a threat to the stability of a two-thousand-year-old institution: it weakens the solidity of the figurative rock on which it rests. . In an interview at the Cannes Film Festival presentation of the film — where it was nominated for the *Palme d’or* — Moretti reiterated that the basic idea regarding the election of the Pope is that he is supposedly chosen by the Holy Spirit. The formal strategy adopted to trivialize the infallibility of the Church, and of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>16</sup> ‘A film of extreme intelligence and freedom.’

<sup>17</sup> ‘It is not sufficient to come up with a genial idea.’

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Bishops’ paper.’

<sup>19</sup> ‘It is not a pretty sight to see the head of the Catholic Church depicted in a farce showing the impossible election of a candidate who is vulnerable and in need of help [...] The Pope is untouchable. He is the Vicar of Christ, the rock on which Jesus founded his Church.’

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allegedly guiding it, is not subtle and this infuriated a few pro-clerical supporters. The film’s realistic treatment is meant to enact a concrete possibility of a newly elected Pope who feels inadequate and unable to fulfill his god-given role. *Habemus Papam*’s verisimilar *mise-en-scène* and treatment, its detours into public space, along with Moretti’s autobiographical musings, ironic twists and summoning of the laws of theatrical representation, vandalize the precepts on which the monumental safety of the long-standing Ecclesia rests.. The Church’s alleged sanctity, its dogmas and austere rule, are undermined by the unpredictable human element thrust into the City’s most holy quarters and then across it into the public space of the streets of Rome. The pragmatics of humans’ rational mind, its peculiar frailty, are redeemed in the process, they are salvaged from the immutable and inaccessible nature of the divine will. The medium of film and, by extension, media technology in general, rescue the viewers from the long standing structures of socio-cultural coercion, regardless of the costs. Jameson’s ideas are still useful in this regard, though his is intended as a postmodern theory. At a time when the old coexists and mixes with the new, the breakdown of the temporal and spatial signposts associated with these same structures, the ensuing isolation, and the ‘dramatized power of the material,’ may very well expose them to novel forms of cultural hegemony, even to an ‘intoxicatory and hallucinogenic’ effect (Jameson 25-28).

In Moretti’s film the outside world, and its signals, are shut out of the space inhabited by the Conclave — the College of Cardinals, and the newly elected Pope —

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as illustrated by the seizing of the psychoanalyst’s cellular phone. Those dwelling in public territory must not receive news, nor hear, nor see what takes place inside or around the Conclave, within the secret sphere of its private proceedings. Even the faithful will not and cannot bear witness to any presumed missteps, nor gain any type of inner knowledge to the process of election and its exclusive circle of electorate. Within the public space of St. Peter’s Square the only sign afforded to the crowds of faithful, is either a black or white smoke, spat out from a visible chimney. “Nulla può trapelare all’esterno,”<sup>20</sup> comments one of the journalist characters as he approaches a small video screen to verify the colour of the smoke. The ballots from an unsuccessful vote were traditionally burned along with wet straw in order to produce black smoke, and when a vote is successful the ballots are burned alone, sending white smoke out of the Sistine Chapel. Over the years the straw was replaced with a chemical compound to compensate for the ‘untrustworthiness’ of the straw. Moretti includes a sequence depicting the notorious guessing-game with the changing color of the smoke to his film’s list of Vatican scenes. In *Habemus Papam* the statute of the Conclave is portrayed as guarded by seclusion and secrecy, the bulwarks of the process’ legitimacy and authority. In the cinema this very notions of secrecy is toyed upon by the staging power and public nature of the medium. The film enacts these opposite qualities and then compromises them by revealing the insecurities dwelling in private spaces. It

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Nothing can leak to the outside world.’

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compromises the Church’s authority by allegorizing the election’s mid-way outcomes, and following impasse. Moretti’s film seems to be announcing from the onset how it intends to construct its subject and space by positioning him or her as an all-knowing, skeptical, and rather critical, spectator. Moretti stages what are presented as some of the private and most telling moments of his red-clad characters, within their inaccessible indoor premises and walls of their inner lives, the ‘walls of their souls’. The evening hours and nighttime of the exclusive electorate are made remarkable by depicting the same in their personal rooms while they are up against nightmares, tedium or dejection, and administering sleeping pills and the like.

*Habemus Papam* reveals a disconnection between the world of the Church and the world of everyday man. The film juxtaposes the outside world with that of the Catholic Church’s inner universe by alternating between indoor and outdoor shots. The result is the building of a space which lacks spatial and temporal contiguity: a pre-modern world on one hand and a modern one on the other. After the requisition of the psychoanalyst’s cellular phone, the only book he is given access to within Vatican walls is the Bible: communication with the world and with others is forcefully replaced by communication with the sacred through The Book. The juxtaposition of indoor-outdoor settings, particularly the binary pair within/without the Vatican walls, establishes the second major trope. The pair metaphorically splits up the film in two halves — though not exactly lengthwise. The first part presents the conflict at the center of the film and its main protagonist; such conflict mirrors the one of a Church

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still rooted in medieval traditions. The second one enacts the resolution of the conflict, which narratively coincides with the build-up to the climatic final outcome. The choice of storyboarding the in-and-out spheres this way, in spatial and narrative opposition, amounts to an aesthetic strategy by which the action of the story is cinematically compressed to account for the inevitable progression of history, from medieval to modern times and from collective to individual praxis. The only clergy leaving the Vatican space is the newly elected Pope, who must come to terms with what is presented as a schism: the differences between the established centennial orders of his consecrated life and that of the secularized outside world. The way out of his depression and impasse is found outside the Vatican walls; he must look for answers to his spiritual crisis into the public sphere and acquire knowledge of the modern world, its rational and even mundane existence. The clash between historical ways of being and feeling is conveyed through the quality of the indoor and outdoor settings, the antithetical perspective in and out of the Vatican walls. The movement and direction from inside to outside amount to abjuring the former beliefs and, with them, the matter of and approaches to the contemporary crisis. Depression is a modern illness, and it cannot be explained within Christian Catholic tradition or theology. The diagnosis requires a renewal of one’s epistemological and exegetic practices, among other things. The principles of modern science are predicated by the trajectory of the story and the illusion subtended by the sophisticated mechanism of moving images. According to the Christian tradition the empty mind is taken up by

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the evil one. In dogmatic pre-modern times certain forms of mental illness were taken as signs of demonic possession, of having made an allegiance with the Devil. Despondency or bewilderment is likewise looked at with suspicion. In the film, Moretti’s character raises a pertinent contradiction between the words in Psalms 55:5 and 102:4 and the idea advanced by the cardinals that “il Papa non può essere depresso.”<sup>21</sup> He makes a distinction between the teachings of the Bible and those of the Church, a dogmatically governed institution and sheepfold. The psychoanalyst reads to the College of Cardinals the Psalmist words: “Fear and trembling have beset me. [...] My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food,” and asks them to confirm whether or not these are the signs evident in a depressed man. Moretti’s camera screens the signs of this depression in the man who by definition cannot possibly be depressed — the dogmatic belief is ridiculed through a humorous style. The centenary-old issue of how to reconcile modern notions of psyche and religious notions of soul plays well into Moretti’s cinematic tale. In spite of its intransigence at the doctrinaire level, which refutes the existence and workings of the psyche, the clergy is lead into seeking a professional opinion, outside the physical and theological perimeter of the Church. The cardinals seek someone capable of dealing with the inner workings of the Vicar-of-God’s consciousness, though being well

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Pope cannot suffer depression.’

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aware as in the words of the prominent Cardinal Gregori that “il concetto di anima e inconscio non possono coesistere.”<sup>22</sup>

Outside the Vatican walls Melville becomes an errant character, frequently filmed with a telephoto lens which underscores his state of bewilderment and need to re-discover his individuality. The sequence that leads him out takes on iconoclastic meaning. The Holy Father of the Church becomes a common man, who rather than turning to the Madonna seeks feminine balm in a female doctor of the psyche. His non-ordained diplomatic men lead the Pontiff, in plain clothes, to the female psychoanalyst — played by Margherita Buy — who is fixated with the “deficit di accudimento,”<sup>23</sup> and who will provide a second professional opinion. The private conversation between the Pope and the second psychoanalyst, at her Roman studio, illustrates the paradoxical action undertaken by Moretti’s fictional Church:

“Cosa fa?”<sup>24</sup> the female psychoanalyst asks.

After a moment of hesitation, the pope answers: “Faccio l’attore... di teatro” — which is a realistic answer for Michel Piccoli, and may be read as a coded reference to Pope John Paul II. He explains what is wrong with him: “Ho la testa piena, ma non so di cosa.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> ‘The concept of anima and subconscious cannot coexist.’

<sup>23</sup> ‘Deficit in receiving parent-care.’

<sup>24</sup> ‘What do you do?’

<sup>25</sup> ‘I... I’m an actor, a theatre actor.’ ‘My head is stuffed... not sure with what.’

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“Forse lei ha sofferto perché sua mamma si è occupata più di qualcun altro: questo potremmo chiamarlo ‘deficit d’accudimento,’ ” replies the female psychoanalyst.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of the meeting he manages to escape the diplomatic clutch, and gets to finally mingle with total strangers on the streets, on buses, and in Roman bars. Still in incognito, he hears and sees ordinary people going about their daily lives, some of whom think him mad as he casually speaks of a speech he must give to a crowd of thousands. Several hours later he is seen calling the distraught Vatican’s spokesperson to justify his flight: “Adesso devo ricordare molte cose che ho dimenticato.”<sup>27</sup> It is within this public sphere, unhinged by the Vatican’s rules, routines, confines, that he untangles the knot at the heart of his reservations about his Papal appointment. In the subsequent scene he meets casually, at a café, the female psychoanalyst once again, along with her friends, and we hear him making a confession: “Non è vero che faccio l’attore; mi hanno bocciato agli esami. Non ero bravo. Invece mia sorella l’hanno presa.”<sup>28</sup> The motivations underlying his identity crisis are incongruous with the career of a Champion of the Church and congruous to a fan of the performing arts. This revelation leads to the theatre house where the once aspiring actor and now

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Maybe you suffered a trauma as a child because your mother cared more for someone else: we could call this: deficit in receiving parent-care.’

<sup>27</sup> ‘Now I must recall many things which I have forgotten.’

<sup>28</sup> ‘It isn’t true that I’m an actor; I failed the test. I wasn’t good at it. My sister, however, passed the test.’

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wondering Pope Melville is attending his beloved *Seagull* play by Anton Chekhov — and here one may pick up a further reference to Pope Carol Wojtyła, the archive footage of his funeral seen at the beginning of the film.

Moretti’s film portrays a Vatican defeated by modernism, and overcome by its own “paura di ammettere le nostre colpe”<sup>29</sup> — as per the plain clothed Pope’s words. Here the character of Pope Melville comes to terms — among a community of strangers and, later, within a theatre setting — with his human frailty, his need to connect, and the need for a mimetic equivalent to life found in the arts. The choice of making the main character end his epiphany in a theatre setting underscores the change: the religious performance is metaphorically traded with, and contained within, the artistic representation. The iconography of the sacred is swapped with the arts of the stage. The movement in the diegesis parallels the direction taken by history in which performance is constantly questioned and re-appropriated through new media. “[...] it is the faith in representation/delegating that is under trial” (Bauer 3). Melville’s institutional role on one hand and intrinsic human nature on the other have entered a conflict: he must now extricate his real persona from the burden of official posturing. It is a purely human dilemma he confronts, how to accommodate that which one feels, and is, with that which one ought to feel or project according to (ecclesiastical) protocols: the inner dimensions of his identity crisis. As per the

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<sup>29</sup> ‘The fear of admitting our faults.’

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Freudian tradition, Moretti’s fictional Pope is made to confront the multiple levels of his fragmented self, his childhood phase and young life, his subconscious, and now the urge to plea to a higher authority, his super-ego. The plain clothed old-man, walking through the streets of Rome like any other ordinary man, and away from the ivory-tower-like Vatican palaces — insulated from the realities of everyday life — humorously illustrates the victory of modernity over dogma. The diegetic movement from close to open space and the physical transformation from wearing ceremonial to plain attire, parallel the character’s rebirth: the outer persona is reborn from the inner self as conjured by the qualitative change in the *mise-en-scène*. This takes place in the unconventional space of laity — or non-denominational space of secular life — beyond the sacred compounds guiding to salvation the souls of reborn Catholics. In the action of parting with his wardrobe, body-guards, and entourage, Melville’s character parts with the symbols and psychological baggage that the praxis of faith has tailored on him. In the process of visiting the female psychoanalyst’s office and friends, he temporarily walks away from the doctrine and belief of an indivisible ‘anima’ to find enlightenment and solace in a more accessible idea and notion of multilayered self.

As far as Catholicism is concerned Rome is still *caput mundi* and the site of its pastoral authority — though there have been temporary relocations of the Holy See in past centuries. This too is a pre-modern and ancient idea the Church banks on, for it is built upon the alleged visit and martyrdom, in the first century C. E., in Rome, of

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the Apostle Peter, the ‘rock’ on which the Church’s foundation is laid. The symbolism surrounding the mythical city and its role in the history of Christendom lives on in its ancient monuments, its heritage sites, its basilicas. Moretti chose to end Pope Melville’s excursus into his modern and mundane dilemmas at the Foro Romano. The archeological site carries connotations of ‘the end of things,’ not in any eschatological sense but in a historical one. Like other recent Italian and foreign films — *Il sorriso di mia madre – L’ora di religione* (*My Mother’s Smile*, Marco Bellocchio, 2002), *Corpo Celeste* (Alice Rohrwacher, 2011), *Jodaeiye Nader az Simin* (*A Separation*, Asghar Farhadi, 2011), *Pour l’amour de Dieu* (Micheline Lanctôt, 2011) — the trend is to allegorize the end of the last (ideological) symbolical fortress. The latter is the grander “prophecy” illustrated by *Habemus Papam* — and similar films within contemporary cinema. In his 1985 film *La messa è finita*, Moretti himself took on the role of a priest, who examines his ministry and societal role, and soon meets with frustration and a crisis of faith. Twenty-six years later, his new film may be read as posing a more provocative and bigger question, and asking whether or not ‘la Chiesa è finita’ (the Church reaches its end). In line with his filmography, in the 2011 *Habemus Papam* Moretti seems to have turned the question, or statement, to the Church itself by asking whether or not, as an institution, it is nearing the end. It may be understood as the musings of an observant Roman artist, a cineaste concerned with depicting the existential and historical dilemmas affecting his own city and its contemporary life. In such a context the latest character of Pope Melville, may well be one of Moretti’s own many persona.

The turn to modern forms of eccentricism becomes an alternative for coping with revolutionary changes and loss. It could be said that the arts may have a way of envisioning the future, and the cinema may have played an important role in projecting on the screen the turmoil of the modern soul. This is no longer the Catholic’s soul — as defined by the Roman Church — but man’s deep-rooted thoughts and feelings, the life of the unconscious. The cinema is a modernist medium: it provides a replica of the world by technical means and in the process reveals new things, hidden to pre-modern artists. It is a self-reflexive medium, which in the hands of a self-referential and narcissistic director becomes an item of faith. *Habemus Papam* reveals more than a fictionalized view into the Conclave’s secret proceedings. The camera and Moretti’s individualism re-propose the election of the spiritual guide of the Christian Catholic world as the mirror of a self-aggrandizing spectacle. The film is made uneven by the eccentric and idiosyncratic agenda of the filmmaker. There are several moments in *Habemus Papam* which can be read as the instances of an exuberant autobiographism, such as the scene where the first psychoanalyst, Moretti’s character, chats with the cardinals about missing his estranged wife, who allegedly left him because of his intellectual superiority. In these scenes one finds the recurring eccentricism afforded by workers in the cinema — re-proposed by this particular filmmaker from *Sogni d’oro* (1981) to *Il caimano* (2006) — and which makes *Habemus Papam* erratic, and Moretti’s cinema unappealing to many viewers. As such the *scopophilia* of, and in, the cinema relocates the places and meaning of worship. In its

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self-indulgence and unevenness, Moretti’s film re-appropriates for itself the god-like narcissus myth. *Habemus Papam* suffers a form of ‘ism,’ morettismo: the chronic hedonism and eccentricism of the writer-actor-director himself. Morettismo too, like other isms, is a product of modernism, like contemporary berlusconismo, grillismo, and savianismo. *Habemus Papam* depicts Moretti’s own idolatrous church, the practice of a writer, actor, director, producer, distributor, and theatre owner, who lives for and worships the cinema along with his fans. In the auteuristic tradition inherited from the previous century, *Habemus Papam* may be read as an ongoing (and pretentious) identity crisis: the perpetual search for an intelligible hero and deity, a self-tailored object of worship. As such, rather than ‘habemus papam’ it may be re-proposing the search for an ‘ecco homo,’ or in Moretti’s case an *Ecce bombo* (1978). The camera’s self-reflexivity and inquisitive eye pose a danger to dogmatism by foregrounding individualism: the symbolic prophecy Moretti’s film stands for. The travelling and close-up shots, along with the rather warm colors, and the other cinematographically coded language tell a different truth, they threaten the authenticity of its real-life referent. The monastic nature of the Vatican City and its Sistine Chapel, are spoiled by the set-up and replicas, and forced into a speculative gaze that trivializes their meaning. The formal strategies prescribe a pleasurable and narcissistic P.O.V.: that of an omniscient, and empowered, viewing subject rather than the experience of the overpowered and humbled occupant of pews. At a spiritual level the apparatus of the cinema by its very nature defiles the Holy See — it is worthy of note to mention that the *Habemus Papam*

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film crew and its equipment were denied access to the actual famed Sistine Chapel and this had to be conjured up, a semblance of it, at the Cinecittà studios. The march of modernism, along with its innovations, fulfills “prophecies” associated with reason and science which continue to predict the demise of faith and religious institutions. As a product of modernity the cinema eschews category of good, bad, or heretical films. Contemporary hermeneutics of the screen vulgarize the long-standing paradigms of the sacred by making them accessible to agnostics and nonbelievers alike. The idolatrous relation with the screen and with the tools of modernity re-dimensions the myth of divinity, scaling it down to the size of mortal men and women. The cinematic equivalent of the Catholic Church in Moretti’s film supersedes its material referent, and is embodied by the cinema itself, the ‘stalls’ where the spectators sit and fix their gaze to the screen in silent worship.<sup>30</sup> The lack of spatial and temporal contiguity in the unfolding space of the story is compensated by the spatial and temporal continuity — not contiguity — in the text of the film. The completeness of the work and unity of the reel replace ideas of unity and harmony with the sacred. The iconography afforded by moving images is elevated to the altar along with the director — he who officiates the ceremony. The loss in matter of faith, and long-standing institutions, are

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<sup>30</sup> According to Melanie Wright in films dealing with religious themes representation takes on the connotations of a religious experience: “The [...] reciprocal nature of the look [...] implies an exchange between viewer and viewed that possesses a dynamic quality akin to that of *darśan*.” Melanie Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, 170.

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compensated by the manufacturing of an image the conventions of which are entrusted to the individual worshiper.

It takes more, however, to perceive the broader critical discourse *Habemus Papam* contributes to. The basis for the public interest generated by the film lies in the historical events taking place outside the cinema, and in whatever ability the cinema may have to act as an agent of projected change. The affected music score, the film’s invisible editing and suturing styles, while pleasurably stitching together the images presented and the viewing subject within the symbolic order prescribed by the cinema, they do not intrinsically afford the viewer any critical thought. The viewing subject is inoculated by the subject and its execution so that its religious dilemmas are those formulated by the film. A leap-of-faith may be required by most non-critical viewers to believe in the plausibility of film’s final outcome. Words and garments duel till the end, in a well choreographed game — as in Moretti’s *Palombella rossa* (1983). In this film an innocuous game is played among theists and atheists friends, symbolized by the amicable volley ball game refereed by the psychoanalyst himself. In such a context the aesthetic discourse the film proposes is a reassuring one, its peculiar detour within and without the fictionalized Vatican walls is utterly safe. The critical viewer, however, sees it as a further example of the ongoing struggle against dominant cultures. Films and books on the burning issues involving religion — and the Vatican, in the case in question — have continued to increase exponentially in recent years. Gianluigi Nizzi’s

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recent books *Vaticano S.p.A.* and *Sua Santità: Le Carte Segrete di Benedetto XVI*,<sup>31</sup> which leak official documents alleging corruption and conspiracies among cardinals who rival for prominence and power at the Vatican, are two among the most popular titles. The centenary-old medium of film continues to coevolve with that of digital images and the technology of the Internet. The emergence of modern media affords users new understanding in contemporary symbolic issues. They may even provide “the possibility of an alternative symbolic economy, forms of culture and politics, and instruments of political struggle” (Kahn 100) — the heralds of a greater prophecy? The real Vatican issues, as some critics have pointed out, lie outside the film, beyond its unexpected or anti-climactic end: the Vatican and the story behind the ‘pagamento dell’ICI,’<sup>32</sup> taxes and IMU (imposta municipale propria),<sup>33</sup> introduced by the Monti government as a ‘salva-Italia’<sup>34</sup> project, the pedophilia crises, the Vatileaks scandal, and the judicial woes of the IOR (Istituto per le Opere di Religione), the Vatican Bank, which has been spoken and written about on several occasions in relation to money-laundering practices. The former minister of Economy and Finance under Berlusconi’s government, Giulio Tremonti, who has met several times with Ettore Gotti Tedeschi (the former director of the IOR) to see what could be done to avoid

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<sup>31</sup> Gianluigi Nuzzi, *Vaticano S.p.A.* (Milano: Chiarelettere, 2009); *Sua Santità: Le carte segrete di Benedetto XVI*, Milano: Chiarelettere, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> ‘ICI (municipal property tax) payments.’

<sup>33</sup> ‘Proper municipal tax.’

<sup>34</sup> ‘Save-Italy.’

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the penalizing action from the EU for the insolvency of the Catholic Church, was heard sending a signal to the Church and to Italians in general in a prime-time interview on Italian national television, RAI, in December of 2012, when he said: “Bisogna cacciare i mercanti dal tempio.”<sup>35</sup>

Moretti’s cinematic “prophecy” makes no direct reference to these issues, and yet reporters and critics have read in it an eschatological sign pertaining to the final events surround the Roman Catholic Church. After the release of the film and Pope Benedict XVI’s unexpected resignation, the hunt for signs of its “prophetic” predictions have increased. Some have read an anticipation of the Pope’s decision to quit in the words he spoke in December of 2012, in a private interview Benedict XVI gave to Peter Seewald (his biographer): “Credo che possa bastare quanto ho fatto. Sono anziano, le mie forze diminuiscono.”<sup>36</sup> Others have interpreted the Pope’s resignation as the beginning of the fulfillment of an older prophecy, one uttered by a young Ratzinger forty years ago, in 1969: “[...] una Chiesa che attraverso questo “enorme sconvolgimento” ritroverà se stessa e rinascerà “semplificata e più spirituale.””<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> ‘The merchants must be kicked out of the temple.’

<sup>36</sup> ‘I believe I have done enough. I’m old, my strength decreases.’ Peter Seewald, “Biograf: Der Papst war noch nie so niedergeschlagen” *Focus*, February 16, 2013 <http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/papst/peter-seewald.html>

<sup>37</sup> “[...] a Church that through this ‘enormous upheaval’ will rediscover itself and be reborn ‘simplified and more spiritual.’” Marco Bardazzi, “La profezia dimenticata di Ratzinger sul futuro della Chiesa,” *La Stampa*, Febraio 18, 2013 <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/vaticano/dettaglio-articolo/articolo/> Other allegedly prophetic writing is found in Juan M. Laboa’s *Gesù a Roma: Il sogno di Benedetto XVI, una parabola*, Milano: Jaca Book, 2013; and Umberto Vitello’s *Il curatore segreto del Vaticano*, Lecce: Lupo Editore, 2012.

The personal and public spheres in *Habemus Papam* (2011): A cinematic “prophecy” on the future of the church

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Predictions, commentaries, and books regarding the Vatican scandals are a staple genre in the publishing industry. Reporters, journalist, and artists’ embody the modern world’s prophets, whether by Jungian vocation or through rational practice. The multitude of human crafted “prophecies” is itself a sign of a typical modern world and trend. The words “prophet” and “prophecies,” which traditionally designate divine knowledge, are often placed in quotations marks. The semantics communicate a modern suspicion that diminishes or refutes altogether any divine underpinning along with its canonical definition. The authors of modern prophecies walk away from the Church. The real Church continues to lose its faithful and along with it its reputation and authority. After his resignation Benedict XVI himself referred to “volto della Chiesa [...] deturpato,” “divisioni,” and “individualismi e rivalità.”<sup>38</sup> In Moretti’s film the character of the quitting Pope says that the Church ought to implement big changes, “la Chiesa ha bisogno di una guida che abbia la forza di portare grandi cambiamenti,”<sup>39</sup> if it wants to fulfill its pastoral role and ensure its survival; but at the moment its light is out, and its administration is utterly clueless on what to do: is this the beginning of the end? While in the real world the Catholic Church is weathering a storm of scandals and living a crisis, in its mimetic equivalent, in *Habemus Papam*, the role and future of the Church are suspended, as per the film’s last image: Melville,

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<sup>38</sup> ‘disfigured face of the Churh.’ ‘Divisions.’ ‘Individualisms and rivalry.’ “Mercoledì delle Ceneri” February 13, 2013, Vatican City.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Church needs a guide who has the strength to bring about great changes.’

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now wearing full papal ceremonial clothes, after indicating to the world the brave choice awaiting the Roman Church, quietly steps back into St. Peter’s Basilica. The newly elected Pope Melville admits falling short of the qualifications and skill required for the job, he asks God’s forgiveness, and makes room for a more capable and worthy Pontiff. Here the timing of the artistic representation and the real event are, once again, off, but the figurative value of the tropes conveyed by the film is irrefutable. Pope Benedict XVI’s fulfillment of the alleged “prophecy,” is delayed to his eighth pontificate year. When announcing his resignation, on February 11<sup>th</sup> 2013, he attributed it to advanced age, and said “sono consapevole della gravità del mio atto.”<sup>40</sup> Thirteen days later, on his last Angelus in St. Peter’s Square, he reframed the meaning of his decision by placing the responsibility of the same on God’s judgment: “Il signore mi chiama a salire sul monte [...] ma questo non significa abbandonare la Chiesa, se Dio mi chiede questo è perché io possa continuare a servirlo [...] in un modo più adatto alla mia età [...]”<sup>41</sup> The Pope’s words reveal how much is at stake: millions of people have built their lives in adherence to the conventions and dictates of organized religion. *Habemus Papam* may be mirroring the need contemporary society has to apprehend the real nature of an institution which has influenced for centuries its private and public life. The question remains: whether modern thought

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<sup>40</sup> ‘I am aware of the gravity of my act.’

<sup>41</sup> ‘The Lord is calling me to climb the mountain [...] but this does not mean abandoning the Church, if God asks me this it is so that I may continue to serve Him [...] in a way more fitting to my age.’

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succeeds in completely alienating rational man from the propositions of religious institutions or from his spiritual instincts altogether.

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